NETWORKING SMART

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Introduction
We live in an "information age," in which the information critical to the work we do is most likely to be available to us by some sort of network connection. The new government workplace is a "networked" environment where our value to the organization is more likely to be measured by the "knowledge" or "information" we command than by the tasks we perform or the roles we assume.

Our fastest source of the information we need to do our work is mediated by our ability to tap an "electronic network" of information at our disposal twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The Internet is a valuable resource for all kind of information, facts, non-facts, opinions, ideas, insights, global understanding and misunderstanding, etc.

There is, however, another form of information that is critical to our success and satisfaction, so that we are positioned to assume new responsibilities and challenges and to gain opportunities to increase our value to the mission of our organizations. This kind of information is sometimes called "know-how" or "knowledge capital" – expertise that has accrued from experience, continuous learning, multiple successes, reasonable mistakes, and close association with numerous other talented individuals. Complex judgments and effective decision making, action, and success are dependent on the sharing of this kind of knowledge capital. It is critical for the success of the new government that this special sort of "know-how" is passed from the most experienced to those who will carry the torch into the future.

The facts, history, and examples of how such knowledge capital can be used successfully is, like most other information, available to us through the electronic connections of the World Wide Web and our various Intranets. Learning how to manage such know-how and to develop the skill at using it to make world-class judgments, to make leading edge decisions, to create innovative and customized solutions, and to take actions that get the results needed is another matter. These lessons and abilities are nurtured through mentoring relationships, working closely with other successful performers, through effective watching and listening when exceptional accomplishments are being generated, and through the endless and passionate linking of lessons learned among as many sources of expertise as possible. The challenge of this transfer and sharing of expertise is the stuff that makes up perhaps the most powerful kind of networking there is. I call this kind of interpersonal networking, "Resource Networking," and this kind of connection with others adds up to the "Network Advantage."

Results-Oriented Networking
In the book, Networking Smart, Wayne Baker, a member of the faculty at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, reports his remarkable research documenting the relationship between peak performance as a leader and the professional habit of "networking" interpersonally with other talented performers who have know-how relevant to one's interests and field of expertise. The essential idea behind this kind of networking is that "two heads" not only are "better

than one," but "multiple 'heads' are essential for success." Of course, none of us has two heads, but imagine the brainpower that informs important or critical decisions, creates breakthrough solutions to critical problems, and provides the richest possible matrix for world-class performance when we connect and integrate the knowledge capital that is all around us! Is it so surprising that what we can learn from each other, regardless of station or responsibility, might be the key to "success" in anything important we do?

Baker concludes from his research that those individuals who are skilled at maintaining and tapping the largest network of "human resources" are typically the most successful in their field of expertise, get the most opportunities, the greatest challenges, make the most money, and are sought out by others for their know-how.

My own anecdotal experience is that this relationship between successful performance and the widest possible sharing of know-how is true at all levels of responsibility in almost all modern organizations. Another way to put it is that our value to our organizations is directly proportionate to the variety of experience and expertise we can tap into and use effectively to accomplish the results we need to generate. The power of teams to accomplish mission-critical results is directly proportionate to the extent to which pooling of experience and expertise relevant to the situation takes place. Networking interpersonally is, in some ways, like tapping the power of an ad hoc team.

The point to all of this is that "networking" is something you already know how to do, and it is not a skill that only "extroverted" people are good at. Networking is clearly a powerful tool for success, no matter what we do. The most successful people in any field give high priority to networking; most of us do not.

Myths About Networking

Myth: I can't be effective at networking with other people because I am not outgoing enough and it is hard for me to strike up a conversation with strangers.
Truth: The kind of networking that is most useful in career development and professional success is based on the fact that two or more people have experience, information, and professional interests in common. Even introverted and/or shy people can talk with someone they don't know when they want to learn or share information that is important to their success.

Myth: People who are good at networking are lucky that talking with strangers is easy for them.
Truth: Networking for resources and information makes everyone who does it nervous and a little at a loss at times. Networking, as well, is not a skill you are born with; it is a skill that is learned from others and from practice. It may become a fairly comfortable habit once you learn what is involved and how useful it is to your own success and satisfaction.

Myth: It makes others uncomfortable to approach them about job possibilities; it puts them on a spot they don't like.
Truth: While, once we have built a solid resource network there are distinct job advantages, resource networking is not done to find job opportunities. The most effective kind of networking is about establishing strong and practical links to critical sources of information in other people with similar interests and expertise. Resource networking is about building connections with others' whose knowledge and experience can help you do the work you are presently pursuing or increase your knowledge and awareness of professional activities and expertise you may be considering for

your future. You may learn about work opportunities because you are well known among a large group of professionals, but it is not the principle reason for this sort of networking.

Myth: Getting a good job is all about who you know.
Truth: In today's job market, who you know is not the key to getting a job that will satisfy your interests and challenge you so that your commitment to your career interests grow. Strong networks can help you find job opportunities indirectly, however; and in this sense, it is not just who you know but the expertise you have shared with others and first hand knowledge of your skills and abilities demonstrated in your networking with other professionals that leads you to unexpected opportunities.

Myth: If I want others to see me as an expert and successful in my line of work, I have to achieve my success on my own. I don't want others to think I can't do my work without their input. I want to be an independent success!
Truth: Tapping the expertise and experience of others through sharing knowledge capital has nothing to do with becoming a success on our own. No one person can know it all, and the know-how that is available in today's high technology world is far too complex for one person to master alone. When we tap others' experience and expertise, adding that know-how to our own abilities and experience, the judgments and solutions we explore become far greater than what we might have constructed on our own. Even if they are not better than what we have originated on our own, sharing our judgments with others whose experience and judgment we trust, adds to our stature among peers and, as well, provides valuable support and confirmation for our expertise and judgments. What makes achievement and success ours personally is what we do with the shared know-how and expertise we have gained from networking and the unique results we get and our unique ways of applying and managing those results.

Myth: I really don't have time to network with others and to maintain all those contacts.
Truth: The facts are clear on this: If you care about the kind of success that keeps your work life challenging and provides you with new opportunities, you will become an effective networker. The fewer connections you have, the more likely your career is to stagnate and become unsatisfying. What is more, the more effective and extensive your professional network is, the more likely you are to experience upward mobility or the kind of development in your career path you desire and the less likely you are to have to engage in a traditional job search. Dynamic and well-maintained networks carry with them access to opportunities that you will not see on your own.

Purposes of Networking
Networking can refer to many different ways of connecting with others. Some people network simply as a matter of habit or because of their "outgoing" personalities, and the interconnections that are established can have varied kinds of fallout, many of them positive. Incidental networking has its value, but the skillful and purposeful use of building and maintaining working connections with others bears the most fruit when structured around a purpose and desired outcomes that are important to your success and satisfaction.

The Outcomes You Want
The many purposes of networking follow directly from the questions, "What am I trying to get out of this network of contacts? What do I want to happen as a result of my networking?"

Generally, the most effective professional networking is about increasing your connection with expertise, experience, and abilities that are directly relevant to your interests, the work you are doing, and/or the work you are exploring for the future.

It should be added here, that your networking may not be work related but may involve non-work commitments in which you are personally and seriously invested, such as a cause, a community need, and family responsibility, etc.

- Outcome: I want to keep up with everything that is going on, the leading trends, changes, and issues of my field or special interest.

- Outcome: I want to find the best information available related to a special interest, responsibility, or concern.

- Outcome: The challenges and responsibilities of the work I am doing have presented me with a steep leaning curve. I would like to develop the perspective and know-how to make decisions and judgments in my work that will set me apart from other performers, and I need to accomplish this development as efficiently as possible.

- Outcome: The challenges of the situation for which I am responsible require decisions and business judgments that have serious ramifications for the success of my organization. I need to be fairly confident that my perspective on the situation and my plan of action are sound and will be supported by key stakeholders.

- Outcome: I would like to share ideas and experiences with others who have similar responsibilities as mine or have had a lot of experience in my field. I generally conceive of my best ideas when they are informed by and/or stimulated by the experiences and perspectives of others.

- I want to become better known in my field and/or organization.

- I would love to have the connections that meant whatever resources, support, challenges, or know-how I need to accomplish important results would be available to me without having to beg, borrow, steal, or market my cause.

- I would like to talk with key people in my field or organization to whom I don't seem to have access.

- What I am trying to accomplish needs the input and/or support of others in order for it to be manageable.

- I would like to learn as much about this organization as possible.

Homework for Networking
Resource networking is most productive when you are clear about your interests and professional commitments – at least in terms of areas of dedicated interest. People are always glad to share information with others who care enough about a subject or professional area or cause that they have become experts on their own commensurate with their experience. Networking is sharing of information.

Your homework for networking then includes at least these efforts:

1. Clarify the interests and commitments in which you are significantly invested. What are the fields, professional knowledge, skills, and abilities, causes, and visions about which you care enough to have learned everything you how to learn about them. You don't have to be the universal expert in the topic area, but your know-how, experiences, and enthusiasm should be demonstrated in your own expertise, ideas, and thinking.

2. Read everything you can manage to read. Research information relevant to your area of interest, and involve yourself in as many different experiences as you can in which you apply what you have learned.

3. Plan a specific brief presentation (90 seconds) that expresses concisely and in an interesting way your interests and commitments that might be shared by others you want to get to know.

4. As you read about your area of interest or commitment – newspapers, professional journals, white papers, etc. – make notes for yourself on who is being quoted or who is writing about the issues that you care about most. Your knowledge of what others you want to get to know value and think is a powerful way to demonstrate that you share values and interests with them.

5. Outline what kind of information you are looking for. What kind of know-how would you like to benefit from? What do you want to compare notes on? What trends do you care about? What do you care to know about who's who in your particular area of interest?

6. Practice talking with people you have never met before. When you are conferences or meetings, make it a habit to introduce yourself and to try to find common interests with those you are meeting. If this is very difficult for you, watch someone you know who is better than you at meeting people, listen to what they say, and then try it with people who agree to help you learn about how to do this well.

Organizing a Resource Network and Sources of Network Contacts
Organizing a plan for effective resource networking begins with the questions, "Who has the kind of know-how and experience that would ideally complement my own abilities and know-how?" "Who shares my particular interests and perspectives, my values and priorities?"

Within an organization it is pretty easy to simply ask the people you know already who they think would be people you would want to network with. Outside the organization you may have to get more creative about identifying the best people with whom to network.

Within the organization, everyone you have ever learned from should become a part of your ongoing resource network. Maintaining those acquaintances and contacts means that you can return to a proven source of learning to compare notes as both you and your resource person grow and gain more know-how. You might want to remember that having contacts and people you can use as sounding boards and information sources should come from every level of responsibility in your organization. Resource networks that are one-dimensional are less useful to you over the long haul than a network of resource contacts that are highly diverse and with varied perspectives on the work to be accomplished. Top leaders are likely to share with you that a part of their ability to guide the organization through change and achievement was their access to information from every corner and level of the organization.

Outside the organization, you are most likely to learn about who might be a dynamic addition to your network of know-how through some of these sources:

- Reading periodicals and newspapers
- Suggestions and referrals from people you already know
- People you meet or who stand out at conferences and meetings
- People who are known to share some of your interests and commitments
- Happenstance meetings while traveling or on public transportation, etc.
- People you meet at church or at a community meeting
- Friends of friends of friends

Once you get your network established and you work at maintaining the network, it will grow automatically because you are caring and feeding it.

As your network grows, structure your interaction with the network in some regular way – e.g., periodic group meetings, or scheduled phone or email contact – so that you and your resource contacts become familiar parts of the network memory. The idea is that when something in your network happens of particular interest, you want to be included in information about the turn of events or new information available. As well, when others in your network have a need to share or collaborate with you because of your unique location, accomplishments, or role, you want them to feel free to contact you. It is in this kind of open communication situation that you will gain the most from your resource network.

The Relationship of Your Network to Jobs
The fact that networking is so frequently associated with a job search requires that something be said here about job search. There are at least a couple of special forms of networking that work very well in job search situations:

1. Sometimes a person gains a lot of valuable information about employment opportunities by speaking with individuals in situations where they think they might like to work. In the best case scenario, the employment situations have been determined to be places where a specific individual's interests and commitments can be exercised professionally in ways that are appealing to him or her. Job seekers who are using this form of networking ought to be clear that they are not contacting people to identify actual jobs; rather they are exploring the fit between their work interests and the work environment and opportunities in a particular organization. Where there are clearly mutual interests, the job seeker is able to establish a positive and genuine rapport with someone in the organization, and the contact person feels that he has some incentive to recommend the job seeker, the likelihood of getting an interview and getting hired increases. Research has shown convincingly that few organizations hire more than 2 percent of their new hires unknown. Most organizations count on some form of preliminary contact with or knowledge of a job candidate to determine whom they are going to consider. This is no less true of government organizations, except that personnel rules and regulations do reduce the chances that the person hired will be someone who is pre-selected. Even in government, though, it is clear that a coop student, an intern, or special program designee has more opportunity to get hired than someone applying cold from outside of government.

2. A slightly different version of the same kind of networking is a professional new to a geographical area or profession. In this case the job candidate might engage in a sort of research project that involves networking with professionals in his/her field. In this case, the job candidate is focused clearly on what is happening in his/her field, who the main players in the area are, local/regional trends, critical issues in the industry, etc. Network contacts that turn out to be especially energized interactions may eventually lead to employment opportunities. If the candidate is working this form of networking effectively, he/she is probably taking the view of networking as a way to investigate and locate the kind of organization and work in which they would like to become involved.

3. By comparison, the relationship of resource networking to job opportunities is truly a secondary effect. The research cited earlier showed that significantly more opportunities for promotions and new challenges resulted -- without seeking the opportunities -- to those professionals who maintained large resource networks strictly for the purpose of maximizing the know-how they were able to bring to their own performance and to themselves serve as a similar resource for others in the network.

When is Enough, Enough?
Many professionals looking at the possibility of using resource networking to enhance their development and performance express their concern that networking of this sort could "really get out of hand." Networks seem never to become infinite. They seem instead to have a sort of life of their own. Large networks are not so large because they include everyone but because they are maintained as open-ended communities of interaction.   Participants remain connected to any network as long as it remains relevant and a genuine opportunity to grow and expand one's own knowledge capital and to become a part of that kind of enhancement for others. When this mutual enhancement ceases to be viable or needed, the network grows in other directions.

If by "enough" you are wondering, "Is there ever a time when I can let up?" The answer is, "Of course." Just like most other great learning experiences, networking is not something anyone would want to become an addiction. It is only a tool for great performances, but it is one of the critical skills in today's toolkit for success.

How Can I Learn to Network Better?
First, discuss your interest in networking with your Career Counselor and let him or her help you formulate a plan and strategy for mastering the resource networking advantage.

The most powerful form of learning, in general, is to watch an expert perform a function and then attempt it yourself, practicing until you feel comfortable performing the function yourself. This requires courage sometimes and a habit of conviction rooted in a personal commitment to take charge of your own career journey.

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